

THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH'S

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY STATEMENT

Summary Statement on Educational Equity

The University of Guelph is committed to the removal of any systemic barriers to university access or academic success based on race, colour, creed/religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, ancestry, ethnic origin, place of origin, or disabilities, as defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code. We recognize and respect the right of students, faculty, and staff to pursue their work and study in a university environment that is free of systemic barriers to the pursuit of knowledge in all its forms, and free of harassment, discrimination, intimidation and abuse. We also recognize and respect the value of freedom of expression generally and academic freedom in particular.

The University of Guelph recognizes that many groups of students have been under-represented in university programs, to their personal disadvantage, to the detriment of those programs, and to the detriment of society. Accordingly, we will strive to increase the access, retention, and graduation of members of such groups. In support of these goals, we will seek to provide a teaching and learning environment that is supportive and welcoming, in which the values of mutual respect and civil discourse prevail, and in which the enriching nature of diversity is both recognized and embodied.

I. CONTEXT AND DEFINITION

A. From Employment Equity to Educational Equity

In the past decade the concept of equity has become embedded as a precept of Canadian society. In the context of employment, it was enacted into law by the Federal Government in 1986 with the passing of the Employment Equity Bill. This law addresses equity in employment and endorses the concepts of reasonable accommodation and affirmative action to create and maintain a working environment free from systemic discrimination. The University of Guelph is strongly committed to employment equity.

The companion principle of educational equity is less clearly defined than employment equity, and is not specifically rooted in legislation, either provincial or federal. It does, however, fall generally within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights Code.

While the principle of educational equity is not referred to by name in the Mission Statement of the University of Guelph, an institutional commitment to educational equity follows from the language and concepts contained in that core document.

B. What is Educational Equity?

The term "educational equity" refers most broadly to a condition of fairness with respect to educational opportunities for all people. Educational equity is a desired state rather than a

consistently present reality; the concept of educational equity attracts our attention now because inequities exist, and because action of some kind is necessary if these inequities are to be eliminated.

C. Designated and Under-Represented Groups

In the debates surrounding educational equity, what it is and how it might be achieved, attention has been focussed on the situation of individuals whose membership in a "designated group"--that is, a group identified under employment equity legislation as having experienced unfair treatment--may have the effect of limiting their educational opportunities. Such groups (including women, visible minorities, people with disabilities, the economically disadvantaged, and aboriginal peoples) are also "under-represented" either overall or at higher levels within the workforce and educational institutions. The terms "designated" and "under-represented" mean different things, but are often used interchangeably because designated groups are also typically under-represented.

We recognize that a group may be "under-represented"--as males are in the undergraduate population of the University of Guelph--without being a designated group, and that under-representation does not in itself constitute inequity. However, where a group is both designated and under-represented either in our community as a whole or at its higher levels, we have cause for concern and reason to consider corrective action. Inequities at least of a systemic kind (that is, unintentional inequities) are typically reflected in a low level of representation of designated groups.

D. Does Educational Equity Refer Specifically to Equity for Designated or Under-Represented Groups?

We recognize that individuals who are not members of a designated group may be or feel themselves to be deprived of educational equity, either as individuals or as members of a group which does not happen to have been designated.

Educational equity is, by definition, no more important for one human being than for another; fairness must mean fairness for all. The fact remains that action with respect to individuals within designated groups is needed to bring us closer to the ideal of educational equity for all.

Educational equity will therefore at present be understood at the University of Guelph as referring specifically to equity for designated groups, to whom focussed attention should be paid. Philosophically, however, or by definition, educational equity will be understood as being equally important for all members of society and of our student population. Wherever an inequity is identified, and whenever it can reasonably be addressed and rectified, it should be.

E. Two Dimensions of Educational Equity

Efforts to achieve educational equity at the University of Guelph will include efforts to increase the representation of groups that are both designated and under-represented within our student

population as a whole or at its higher levels (e.g., within doctoral programs) or within a particular program.

Educational equity at the University of Guelph will be understood as referring also to the need for curricular and course content embracing a diversity of approaches and perspectives and reflecting a broad range of human experience in Canada and the world, and to the need for support services that take such diversity into account.

This additional dimension of educational equity speaks to the range of educational opportunities that are available to students once they have joined our community, as well as to the possible link between an individual's academic success and a learning environment that assigns obvious value to that individual's cultural history.

F. Inclusiveness and Diversity

Educational equity is addressed by offering what is often termed a more "inclusive" curriculum. Inclusiveness, however, is subject to limitations imposed by the resources available to us and by the requirements of the various disciplines. All knowledge and all approaches and perspectives cannot be accommodated formally within a single university's curriculum. Neither can all student interests be allowed to displace other learning experiences that are judged by faculty to be essential course components.

A more inclusive curriculum would include, but would not be limited to, a greater representation within the curriculum of the cultural experience of designated groups. Matters entirely unrelated to the cultural experience of these groups can also be addressed under the rubric of inclusiveness.

Another term often employed in this context is "diversity," which the University of Guelph will take as including a specific reference to designated groups, but not as constituting a synonym for them--either with respect to the range of students we hope to attract to the University of Guelph, or with respect to the need for diversity of content and approach within our academic programs.

Despite the constraints addressed above, the University of Guelph is committed to increasing the diversity and inclusiveness of its curriculum. We recognize the importance of this goal both for members of designated groups and for the community as a whole.

G. The Mission Statement: Diversity, Learner-Centredness, and Academic Freedom

The University's commitment to educational equity is signalled in our Mission Statement. We speak there of the University's commitment to "a purposefully diverse community" and to placing "the learner at the centre of all it does."

We understand the reference to a diverse community as including and as specifically signalling, but not as being limited to, ethnic and cultural diversity (or the diversity achieved by the greater representation of designated groups). The term "purposefully diverse community" commits us to actions aimed at increasing the representation of designated and under-represented groups in our student body. It also commits us to the proactive valuing of diversity of other kinds.

The choice of learner-centredness as a strategic direction for the University has a clear link to educational equity. Both ideals require us to attend to a diversity of learning needs and interests, some but not all of which may be related to membership in a designated group.

The Mission Statement asserts the fundamental importance of academic freedom and speaks of the need for an intellectually challenging environment. The University is thus responsible for creating an equitable learning environment that actively promotes freedom of inquiry and expression for all members of the University community, within a curricular and extra-curricular context that is genuinely and consciously learner-centred.

Both academic rigour and our sense of community will be served as the University of Guelph accommodates the multiplicity of approaches and interests that the strategic direction of learner-centredness and the core principle of academic freedom should equally be seen to imply.

H. Tensions to be Addressed

Educational equity is concerned first with access to our programs, and second with the delivery of a diverse and inclusive curriculum as well as support services that are sensitive to diversity. To achieve greater equity, we must address each of these components. We must also address the potential tensions between (1) affirmative action and fairness to students who are not members of designated groups, and (2) curricular reform in pursuit of educational equity and the fundamental value of academic freedom.

II. ACCESS

The University of Guelph has committed itself to purposeful diversity with the aim of benefitting both those members of designated and under-represented groups who might join our community and the University as a whole. To this end, the University will maintain an equitable admissions policy centred on recruitment and access.

The first component of an equitable admissions policy is the active recruitment of students from designated and under-represented groups. Through liaison and recruitment programs such as the Six Nations Project and Project GO, the University will attempt to build strong links with diverse populations.

The second component of an equitable admissions policy is a financial aid program that is responsive to the needs of designated and under-represented groups. One critical ingredient of an appropriately structured financial aid program will be an increased number of needs-based awards, serving both economically disadvantaged students in general and the students from designated and under-represented groups who require such assistance. In addition, some aid may be targeted specifically for members of designated and under-represented groups and/or for particular populations (e.g., schools or geographical areas) in which such diversity is generally found.

The third possible component of an equitable admissions policy, involving a student's membership within a designated and under-represented group as a factor in admissions

decisions, is more controversial. Some members of our community would regard any consideration of this factor as producing an inequity with respect to applicants who are not members of a designated and under-represented group; others would see some consideration of this factor as a means of off-setting past inequities and of producing greater equity overall.

The University of Guelph will not set admission quotas for members of designated and under-represented groups; neither will it suppose that "blindness" to this factor is necessary to achieve equity in admissions decisions. For applicants whose secondary school marks are below the level established for automatic admission to a particular program and above the minimum established as necessary for admission, other factors are currently being considered. The question is whether membership in a designated and under-represented group should be formally identified as one of those factors.

Secondary school performance can be affected by a wide range of factors unrelated to ability; thus a consideration of grades alone would prevent us from admitting some very able students, including some from designated and under-represented groups. Student profile forms address this general need by soliciting information about prospective undergraduate students that is supplementary to measures of secondary school academic performance. In addition to helping us make better academic decisions, the profile forms allow us to admit to the University qualified students whose particular talents and perspectives will enrich our community.

Profile forms are used to identify factors that might have led to somewhat lower marks and/or particular contributions the applicant might make to our community. Because membership in a designated and under-represented group can have either or both of these effects, it seems a reasonable factor to consider in the more holistic or contextual process of assessment that the profile forms allow. Thus, where applicants have chosen to identify themselves on the profile forms as members of a designated group, admissions committees will appropriately take note of this fact.

Such information will not determine admissions decisions. Rather, it will be considered within the context of other available information to achieve fairness overall and to fulfill the University's commitment to the creation of a purposefully diverse community of scholars.

All students admitted to the University of Guelph directly from secondary school must have a record of accomplishment at that level which suggests the probability of success at university. The University sets minimum academic standards based on high school performance, and these standards will be adhered to for all applicants.

The University of Guelph recognizes that the probability of success for students from designated and under-represented groups will be increased by the University's commitment to diversity and to the recognition and celebration of difference.

III. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The University is committed to programs that acknowledge, accommodate, and encourage a diversity of perspectives and ways of learning. This commitment is a logical and necessary

consequence of our commitment to a purposefully diverse community. It should be reflected in the curriculum, in the classroom, and in the academic and personal support systems available to our students.

The commitment to a more inclusive curriculum must be embodied at the levels both of individual faculty and of existing groups concerned with the design and approval of programs and courses. Academic freedom, including the rights of faculty with respect to the design and conduct of individual courses, must always be respected. At the same time, groups such as departmental curriculum committees and program committees have an obligation to ensure that at their level the ideal of a more inclusive curriculum is vigorously pursued.

Individual members of faculty design their courses both independently and within the context of programmatic goals. The degree to which the individual member of faculty determines the nature of a course and the degree to which course content is affected by understandings reached with the department or program committee will vary from one course to another. The accommodation of programmatic considerations does not and cannot ever involve any infringement of academic freedom. It is the responsibility of faculty to address programmatic goals in their teaching, and the responsibility of department chairs to match courses and the faculty teaching them in a manner that supports those goals. As stated previously, the inclusiveness of curriculum is subject to limitations imposed by the expertise of faculty and the demands of the discipline.

All members of the University of Guelph community participate in the creation of our learning environment. We have a shared responsibility for making that environment lively and rich, challenging, respectful of difference, and hospitable to all.

Approved by Senate: March 31, 1998